

Reuben St. Pierre Interview

Interviewer: Earl Robicheaux

Earl Robicheaux: Okay, could you state your name, date of birth, when you were born, and where we are now?

Reuben St. Pierre: Reuben St. Pierre. I was born the 24th of September, 1932. I was born in, in Galliano, and I moved down here as a young boy. I was about twelve, thirteen years old. And I worked in the oilfield – went in the service. I lived with my parents till I was twenty years old, and I worked in the oilfield for about twenty years for the same company – contractors. I was a welder. And then I got blown off – I was on the drum offshore - 1975. And I was on top of a drum, and doing some welding – drum blew up. Blew my foot off and all, and they broke, and um, I survived all that, and then I went in business for myself. I was – I worked in '77, I had a welding truck, and I'd weld, and tractors, and whatever.

R: Let me ask you this. When you moved down here, is it in what, '32?

S: I moved down here in um, '47.

R: Okay, what did the island look like at that time?

S: Oh, beautiful. Nothing compared to what we got here now.

R: Can you describe it?

S: They had a gravel road, plenty trees, and not so many people - just natives of Grand Isle. It was fine people. And um, we didn't have no transportation – when we moved to Bayou Rigaud, we were gonna build a house. Well all – a good house. My daddy built us a nice house. Everybody called them camps. But uh, it was more than a camp, you know. And uh, we, we didn't have no transportation till uh, I believe in uh, I went in the service in '53, and I believe that's when my folks bought my car – but no car, but we never had a car. And then when I – when we moved to Grand Isle, me and my brother and a sister. And we had some cattle. We brought some cattle deal in Grand Isle. And they had about five hundred heads of cattle on Grand Isle – belonged to a Rigaud, and Florence Millet, and we brought a few heads of cows when we moved down. We brought a few horses too. They also had um, forty, fifty wild horses. And it was – it was lovely. It kept the terrain beautiful. Kept the grass down – and they had spots where they had trees. It was like a tunnel in there. They'd get in there, and you could almost stand in there when it was raining you wouldn't get wet. You know, that's how secluded it was – you'd get out the mosquitoes. And when we brought our horse, we had a couple of mares, me and my brother. He was smaller – younger than me. I was fourteen, fifteen years old then you know, um, we'd come to Grand Isle on horseback. On weekends, we didn't have no transportation. Lived way on there, three miles to over here. And we'd go on horseback. We'd saddle up our mare, and I'd saddle, and we'd ride bareback.

R: So you lived on the east end?

S: Yeah - on the east end. On what we call Bayou Rigaud over there – that's like a little town you know, Bayou Rigaud. Because the bayou runs – that's Bayou Rigaud, and we lived right on the end there. They had one big grocery store – Florence Millet. The grocery store, and a bar, and a fishing pier and all that. Very popular, you know.

R: And you had said your dad was an oyster fisherman.

S: Yeah.

R: Can you tell us a little bit about where he fished and how...

S: Yeah. Um, my daddy never done nothing else but oyster fishing. Um, as long as I've known him, he knows that I was old enough to know what he was doing, he was an oyster fisherman. And he never did work - he wasn't working for himself. He'd work uh, for other people, but he was a good working man – he knew the oyster business good. So he latched on with um, Morgan City Packing Company, um, Mr. Bertou Cheramie. And uh, he ran the oyster business. In other words, they might've had um, they had like fifteen, sixteen little lugger boats, and beds up to glory – maybe two thousand acres of bedding out there, and the lake, Grand Lake over there – we called it Grand Lake. And he'd oversee these men – all about uh, seventeen, eighteen men, twenty, he was foreman. And I've seen – then they worked them oysters. They'd bed them, and they'd cultivate them, they'd throw them in clear um, clean beds, they'd call that – was a clean bed. It was a gravel bed. And they'd cultivate these oysters like this, you know. Beautiful. And when they were ready to sell, you know. They uh, they would harvest them. They'd catch, them, sack them, get them to Bayou Rigaud on the dock. And I've seen as much as um, five hundred sacks a person laid on that – on that wharf waiting for an 18-wheeler.

R: So from Bayou Rigaud, where would they go – New Orleans or something?

S: Yeah. They'd go to New Orleans with them. Most of them would go to New Orleans at the French Market, and sometimes they'd have a boat that would navigate back and forth. They would come get a load – he'd go to the French Market.

R: So most of his beds were like in the north part of Barataria Bay?

S: Uh, yeah. Mmhmm. Going on toward Lafitte you know, but most of the bulk of your oysters was right there – you know where the fort's at? Fort Livingston? All along there – north, and um, bay Deslatte, going west, big stretch. Um, big piece of bedding. And my daddy worked for Cheramie for, I don't know.

R: And what was his name? Your dad?

S: Rosemond.

R: Rosemond. Yep.

S: Rosemond. Yep.

R: And you used to help him?

S: I helped him. Yeah, I've only helped – always start, that fishing was like um, low rate work. I didn't want to be a fisherman, you know, because you know, I've seen the people struggling. Um, wouldn't make no money, but when I was uh, catch a little job here and there, do a little odd work here when I was sixteen, seventeen years old. And sometimes he didn't have a good deckhand or a deckhand that quit or something. Of course that's when he went to – when I was doing that, when I worked for him. Then he quit Cheramie. He got his own bed – got his own bed – what we call across the lake – Bayou (Colette?) Bayou Santini, um, Grand Bayou, that's almost in Lafitte over there. And he got – he got his own bed, and oysters grow wild over there, you know. And um, he uh...

R: But he never went out, say, far west towards like Plaquemine or something?

S: No. Well, it's not far from Plaquemine. Um...

R: Yeah.

S: I was personally raised in Borne over there, and I haven't been over there in thirty years - thirty, forty years. Probably couldn't even go over there.

R: Well where'd he live?

S: He lived in Bayou Rigaud.

R: Oh.

S: But they had an oyster camp over there – big camp. I was a big camp that housed about twenty men, you know. And he spent a lot of time there, but we had our house at Bayou Rigaud. So he'd come in every night. He had a little speed boat that the company...

R: So what did Bayou Rigaud look like at that time?

S: Bayou Rigaud was just um, a big piece of marsh. You know, big piece of – pretty the same except it didn't have all this development then, you know, that was a while. That was all marsh and canals and slews and they had that big store that followed Highway One, you'd go around the curve, I don't know if you're familiar with this. You go on highway one – goes east, and you turn west, and it goes to the end of the road. And they had a big store there. A big grocery store, bar – fine place.

R: Yeah, I was, I was born in '54, so that would've been the time inaudible) you know.

S: Well, then Hurricane Betsy comes, destroyed all that. Then uh, Mickie Harris um, Alma Millet, which she was a Florence Millet, founded Bayou Rigaud store, uh, she owned the store for a while after the old man died. And then Mickey Harris came in the picture and married Alma, and he got the construction business with uh, Exxon, you know. And uh, they run the store for a good while you know.

R: Uh, you mentioned hurricanes. Can you talk a little bit about hurricanes?

S: Oh yeah.

R: Um, you stayed for most of them?

S: Um, yeah. Um, I remember in '47, I try not to remember too many hurricanes. Um, in 1947, we moved down here, we moved in February. And that September, we had a hurricane, but there were no names then. I don't know what it was. We didn't even know we had a hurricane. About twelve o'clock at night, it came. And we – we was there at home. My momma and daddy was there, we had about four, five feet of water over there. Six feet, I don't know. And we spent the night, and we got so scared, that the next day, they had some people going up the bayou, so we got in a truck. We – it was like evacuating after the storm. You know, and uh, then we had um, the next hurricane after that was hurricane Flossie. That was a pretty bad hurricane.

R: So can you tell us what the sky looked like before the storm?

S: The sky?

R: Mmhmm.

S: Oh my God. Ha ha– you never been in bad weather? It's dark. It's blowing, and it's raining, you know. It's terrible, you know. And if you know what's coming on, it's even worse, you know. And like um, hurricane Flossie – me and my daddy, we stayed – we had a good house in Bayou Rigaud. The house is still here on Grand Isle. It's very nice too. And we sold it. We stayed for Hurricane um, Flossie, me and him. My mom and them had left – went on the bayou. And my daddy got scared. If I listened to him, we would've drowned. And he was a pretty tough fellow, you know.

R: The reason I'm interested is because I've heard a lot of stories about the entire island being covered by water - whitecaps and that sort of thing.

S: Well, um, during the hurricane, you can't hardly tell what's going on. You know what I'm saying? If you go outside, you know that the tide's high, and you have plenty water, so you can't – but we never had no kind of surge, or no kind of tidal wave, nothing like that. If uh, a hurricane lasts four hours, you got about the same amount of water all the time. And when – when the hurricane dies out, well hey – that water goes. Within an hour, it's gone.

R: So what was Betsy like?

S: Betsy was bad. One of the worst ones we've had. I don't care what anybody says. For hurricane Betsy, I had three kids, and I had a nice little house not too far from here – a couple blocks from here. And I was – I was working for the oil company then. And I was offshore in Morgan City, and I come in at about three o'clock in the evening, but we knew that Betsy was coming, you know. I got home; my wife was ready to go. Had the car packed and three kids, she was going to Thibodaux. So I told her – I said, I'm gonna stay behind and, and board up, and I said, I'm gonna go to um, to the Coast Guard Station, which is the Town Hall today. But, that was about three o'clock, by the time I boarded up, put up everything I had, I had a horse, and I've always had horses. And secured everything. Well it was about six o'clock. It was pretty bad. It was dark, it was – and then it came. The hurricane was there. You know, little by little. It didn't come all at one time. And it was blowing from the north. There was no water on

Grand Isle other than rain. Well I got caught, so I got into the house -in the house. Well when you spend a hurricane, you hear the same sounds, you know. And you're scared. You know, um, I was about thirty years old. But you know, you can't say I wasn't scared. And a lot of..

R: Things like, blowing up?

S: Oh yeah. Oh man, you hear all kinds of noise. Anyway, about twelve o'clock at night – well during the night, I'd been working two or three days straight. And then I got um, I got sleepy. I found our little couch and went to sleep - passed out a little bit. That was about eleven o'clock I guess. And what woke me up is when the house - little frame house, not a big house – blew into the street on Cedar Street. It blew into the street. Well hey, I didn't know – I didn't know what was going on, you hear. And what woke me up, um, was a little sofa bed like, and my little house is sitting on some four-foot pilings – a little house that I had bought – didn't know how strong it was. It looked strong. What happened – the house picked up. It fell into the street right in front of the house – about thirty feet. It fell into the street. The pilings came through the floor. It brought the pilings with it when it went up. Now I don't know if – it wasn't water. Force of wind or tornado, or whatever. Picked it up, and when it landed, it comes through the floor. Well naturally, there was two of them right underneath the bed just like I'm laying right here, and it comes underneath that, and flopped me up there – balloon. And it was so dark. I remember having a flashlight in my hand. I had a rope, and something else, you know. And it – it tumbled me over. And that was about twelve o'clock. So I got up – man, I didn't know where I was – I didn't know what was going on. I come back to sit to my senses. I said, well, I'm still fighting the storm, you know. I tried to open the front door – it wouldn't open. Well I had to break it, and at that time, while I was doing all that, trying to get my senses back, the eye came over. And I had – I knew, I had heard about the eye, you know, it'd get calm, and it would uh, kind of day like, well, I opened that door, and I knew that – I said lord, the eye's coming over. It's gotta be. It got calm, and you could almost –at that's at twelve o'clock. You could almost recognize the person at two hundred feet, you know. Like days before – dawn, before – sort of. So I says it's time for me to go. I took off. I ran to the Coast Guard Station. And I got there, when I got to the Coast Guard Station, the storm was here coming from the Gulf. Well by the time I climbed them stairs, I had water up to my waist.

R: As a child, I've always heard people you know, the radio, um, coming from the Coast Guard Station – what was it like in there?

S: At the Coast Guard Station?

R: Mmhmm.

S: Well they always had um, there must've had about anywhere from fifteen to twenty Coast Guard there. And um, they had - they had about uh, fifty people – fifty to sixty people. Now the island people and we uh, waited storm out till four o'clock in the morning. And the storm comes down, you know, slept a little bit, ate a little bit – the Coast Guard were real nice – they were real nice.

R: And the mayor always sort of stays there.

S: Oh, I don't remember. I don't remember if we had a mayor then. No. I don't think we had a mayor then. Because Mickey Harris was one of the first mayors – and I don't – I don't' really remember if he was the mayor then, or it happened right after Hurricane Betsy, or what. But he was the first mayor. Coast Guard station used to serve as uh, as a police, the medics, uh, fire department, oh, whatever- the Coast Guard was there. They was there.

R: That was sort of the main men.

S: Oh, the Coast Guard used to protect everybody. Yeah. And we spent the storm there till four o'clock in the morning, and then me and this guy, Dale Honeycutt, crazy son of a gun, I told Dale, I said, let's go to Bayou Rigaud and see about my momma's house. And I said, I'm gonna stop and see about *my* house. Right here. Right in the neighborhood here. Right in back here. So we took off, and it was blowing from the west. My God, it was blowing. I mean blowing, I'd say forty miles an hour – I'm not exaggerating. Going to Bayou Rigaud is fine – you got wind in your back. It was past by my house – my house wasn't there. And I used to hunt a lot of rabbits, and I had like ten hounds. One hound was in the yard, and she wanted to eat us up. She was mean – I mean just big old uh, walker hound. Good rabbit dog. Couldn't make friends with her – we left her there. We left – we walked all the way to Bayou Rigaud. Got to Bayou Rigaud, passed my momma's house, my daddy's house – I always called it my momma's house. And everything was fine, you know. It hardly had any damage. I went to the store over there – well it was wet. It was in bad shape.

R: So there was water in the road...

S: Oh, they had water in the road. You know, and all that – not much, but puddles and all that. But the wind – the wind blows water on you. Went to the store – they had a clothing store there, so we got some dry clothes, dry shoes. We head back. Well we was walking on a 45 coming back facing that west wind. It beat still we got to camp, about middle ways, we couldn't go no more. Then somehow or another- we climbed up in the camp, and we had a dry room, and we slept till three o'clock that evening. And after the storm it was terrible. Um, it was hot. It was dry – I talk about hot, you hear. In the eighties – eighty five degrees, and it was sandy – you had sand all over the place, right. It was – it was bad.

R: No wind?

S: Huh?

R: No wind?

S: No wind, no water.

R: I wanted to ask you about mosquito swarms.

S: Nope – uh uh.

R: No?

S: Mosquitoes never was uh – much of a problem. Not – not around the storm. Mosquitoes never was a problem – maybe a week or two after the storm, you know. On the calm days, and you get a little mosquitoes at night, but mosquitoes never was much of a problem. But before that, mosquitoes was a problem, before they sprayed and all that.

R: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like before they sprayed?

S: Before the spray, it was bad. Like the cows and the horses – they'd gather up and you know, with the odor of the manure, or whatever, it protects them. And they all stand up cows and horses all together. And they try to sleep at the same place every night to – because of the smell, you know. And that would help them a lot, but I've seen them hit that water over there and just their heads sticking out. And every now and then, they'd (makes noise). You know, blow the mosquitoes off the head. That's how bad the mosquitoes was. The mosquitoes used to get bad. Very bad.

R: I'm trying to let this four-wheeler – pass. Okay. So the development of Grand Isle - can you talk a little bit about what happened since you've been here, to the island?

S: Well, Grand Isle grew ever since, you know. From day one, that I was here, Grand Isle always grew, you know, tourists and uh, then they blacktopped the road, we didn't have no – then they took the livestock at large. You couldn't have cattle that wasn't at large, and it kept building up, and uh, till these few storms, killed us, I'd say.

R: Let me ask you this. Do you have any memories or stories of Jean Lafitte?

S: No. I was too young. Haha. I've heard a few stories, but you know, how can you – you can't hardly believe things like that because hey. What the hell we talking about – a hundred years ago. But I've run cattle on the fort. You know, where the fort's at? And you know, a lot of uh, stuff left behind. The cannons and the – quite a few things I've seen over there already. Things like that where they used to make the bread, and uh, the chimney – they had right in the middle of Grand Terre, they had a chimney. A big stack where it was a – that was a sugarcane plantation at one time there. And we had a cattle pen there – right by there. Right by the chimney – a lot of bricks – I still got some bricks at home from the chimney. And my cousin and I – Herbert Vaige. This chimney was about, I'd say forty, forty five feet tall. We always wanted to climb on top of that chimney. One day, me an him by ourselves, because we had cattle and horses over there – we'd go maybe two or three times a month we'd go over there and look at the cows and the horses, and one day we was over there, I told him – I said, "Man, I've always wanted to climb on top of that thing." Inside the chimney, perfectly formed, you know, and on top, you know, it's a little bit bigger on top. Double, triple bricks. But they had a hole in there, so I got inside. From the inside I climbed –and the bricks, you know, been there two hundred years. And uh, some how or another, in the corner, bricks – I climbed on top. Sitting on top – boy you could see everything. Herbert's down there, and Herbert's the type of guy – you can do it, I can do it. And if you want to do it, I want to do it too. That's the way he is. I said, Herbert, it's kind of skimpy over there. Oh yeah? But you up there! Herbert got behind me – I was sitting on top. He climbed, and we the only two people. If he was sitting right there, he'd tell you the same thing. We were the two people that would ever find that chimney. That crazy enough to make an attempt to climb it. But it was to get down. Man, we had a time. We uh,

afraid that some of this brick would pull off where you're coming down, but we did it. We did alright. No problem.

R: Well the chimney is no longer there, right?

No, it disintegrated – it went down, Hurricane Betsy knocked it down. It went down a big pile of bricks, then it wind up to be in the gulf about five hundred feet out in the gulf. In fact, you can go right now, and probably at low tide, you'll stand on a pile of bricks. Unless the storm – but since uh, since we uh, got rid of the cows and horses, I haven't been back to the fort in seven, eight years.

R: So you had a cattle pen on Grand Terre?

S: Yeah.

R: Um, how many cattle were there?

S: At one time, we ran eighty heads of cows. And we had about anywhere from thirty to forty horses – wild horses. We start up with a couple of mares, and somebody gave us an old beat up mare they didn't want no more, but oh, they call us. We take them and bring them over there to the fort, and she'd fatten up, and we ran – we made some good money over there. We didn't feed them, we didn't vaccinate them, we didn't de-lice them – we didn't do nothing but go once a year. And catch a calf. Cowboy style. That's running down – rope them. And I never was too much of a cowboy. Uh, I can do it – I've always been a cowboy, but I mean Herbert was better cowboy than me because he didn't want to do – they had to have a – a ramrod, you know. I would've liked to ride, but I had to drive the tractor and the trailer and load them up. So that's why I did it a few times with him.

R: Did they ever slaughter the cattle?

S: You mean –

R: For any families on the island?

S: No, no. We never did. We never did.

R: So what was the purpose of wild horses?

S: It was just a hobby. We were working offshore seven and seven, and that's how we started with the cattle. I not for a business, it was like a hobby. And we bought a few cows, and they had a man that used to run a lot of cows before us, and when it was uh, kind of a conniving deal. But uh, he was putting these cows on that through a friend, so we decided we gonna put some too. So we had a friend that had uh, an interest over there. Um, so he – he'd come and partner with us too. There was three partners for a while. First it was two of us, and three of us - Nelson, Herbert, and myself. And uh, yeah, hey, Everything grew. Then one day...

R: Let me rewind this tape here.

S: We sold some – believe it or not, we sold some horses that wound up in Las Vegas as bucking stock. A guy from Houma – I can't think of his damn name. Guidry – a fellow by the name of Guidry. First day, I can't think – he's still in the business. He uh, he does the rodeo bulls and all that stuff. Some of our bulls, what they were looking for, they knew we had those wild animals. They looking for animals that don't know man. Hey. And that's what makes good bucking stock. And we sold some of the bulls – scroungy old bulls – for good bucks.

R: If we could back up a bit, you said Grand Terre, at one time was bigger than Grand Isle.

S: Um, I imagine at one time, it might've been. But I've only known Grand Terre to be um, twenty three uh, that was an aerial survey. Um, twenty three hundred acres don't seem much. Something like that, you know, that was like an aerial survey - that's many years back, but it was – it was about the same size.

R: Didn't they have some sort of air strip out there?

S: Yeah. Mmhmm. Yeah, when um, Wildlife and Fisheries built a facility over there with um, Jimmy Davis was governor I believe. One of them (inaudible) – they made a nice strip. But they gave us.

R: Was that sort of the beginning of weather monitoring? Because they have buoys now you know, and Grand Isle is a main place amongst, you know...

S: Yeah. Grand Terre has been – has always been a popular place because of the fort and um, sugarcane two hundred years ago. And then Wildlife and Fisheries walked up in there, and put all these buildings, and it was a – it was um, a moving place for a while, there.

R: But Wildlife and Fisheries – they're not there now.

S: No. Yeah Wildlife and Fisheries is still there – unless they moved. They built that new facility over here on Grand Isle. But eventually, they're gonna move whatever they got over there – I don't' know what they want to do with the – they probably gonna keep some of these ponds. They raise shrimp there. You know, they study them shrimp, and they probably gonna uh, use it - still use it. But it's going to the dogs.

R: Tell me this. Can you talk a little bit about Queen Bess?

S: Queen Bess – I'm not familiar with it because in my days, it never was called Queen Bess. Queen Bess was a Bird – Bird Island I believe. I've never been to the Bird Island. That was Razor Island in my days when I was a kid – Razor Island. And that's where the oyster camp was at – right there on the north end. And my daddy used to raise hogs on that island. Raise some big hogs – plenty hogs. And the way he started raising hogs is because Alex Sanders before him, had a little camp on top of that island. He had hogs. So when the old man got sick and died, my daddy was working there with Cheramie, uh, oyster business, he raised hogs there.

R: So how big would Razor Island have been?

S: Razor island was – I'd say Razor Island in my day when I was a kid, could've been maybe been uh, two miles long. Maybe uh, a little less than a half a mile – a quarter mile wide, and all they had on there was uh, um, mangroves. Mangrove vine. Call them pee pee mon. They'd grow a seed about like that. And the hogs were crazy about that. You oughta see – and uh, that's it.

R: Uh, do you remember Bird Island?

S: I don't know what they call Bird Island, to tell you the truth. In this lake over here, we must've called it something else. It must be the same island that the pelicans are landing on now. But that's the only Bird Island.

R: I think it disappeared.

S: Yeah.

R: Uh, a lot of people in this project talked about islands that have disappeared.

S: Independence Island. That's between Razor Island, Bird Island – the same Bird Island people call it. Independence Island was between Grand Terre and Razor Island. That was a little island. I'm talking about maybe uh, three acres at the most. They had an oyster camp there, and they kept that island with oyster shells. Solid oyster shells were in it and they had these mangroves that grow on it. But then the tide, and the people – they had a palm tree on there. That palm tree – I don't know how many people would remember the palm tree. You could look at Bayou Rigaud over there, and you could see that tree in the middle of that lake – it was beautiful. They had a palm tree must've been thirty, forty feet tall. And it was growing on that island in them shells too. And then Hurricane Betsy knocked it down. But I remember the palm tree well.

R: Can you remember any other islands that have been uh, covered by water?

S: Um, no, um, they had – they had a few little islands – it was kept up with oyster shells. People had some oysters. Um, people call the oysters and all that, and they'd throw the oysters on the bank if they had a little island – and it made the island bigger and bigger and bigger you know. Hey. They'd throw hundreds of sacks a day on there, and – but the tide, the current ate all that up. But I don't remember Razor – the only island I remember around that part was Razor Island and Bird Island and Independence island, and that's about it. They might've had a few more little spots you know, little island about maybe a half acre, an acre at the most. And they disappeared – I knew of a few of them.

R: But let's say in your lifetime, if we look at the marsh by Golden Meadow to here, how much would – how much of it would you say has been...

S: Oh, a lot. I mean, I don't go over there that much, let's see, a few years back, I hadn't been over there. But um, I used to rabbit hunt in the back of Golden Meadow – Catfish Lake and all that. I probably would get lost. That's how bad it is. Because I knew all these places, you know. Go rabbit hunting in them little islands, pipelines, whatever. But I'd probably go over there now – I haven't hunted there in twenty years. And I know that I wouldn't know where I'd be. There's no way.

R: You know, I can say the same thing, but – because of a different reason – sedimentation. We're building land instead of losing land, you know.

S: I don't think we gained much on the building. Haha.

R: So uh, what uh, you know, in terms of survival on the island, would you say about Grand Isle in terms of the heartiness of and resilient aspects of the people here?

S: You mean in the olden days? My time or before that?

R: I would say just generally, you know, all throughout the times. All throughout the years.

S: Oh, man. People made a good living here on Grand Isle. That's – the ones that didn't live right because they were lazy. They still got some of that stuff going on. They're still lazy. But uh, Grand Isle people, the natives of Grand Isle – they didn't work for the oil companies. A few, you know. But when I moved out here in 1947, they had a few young men that worked. I was too young to work for the oil companies then. Very few. But they were all fishermen. They'd trawl, and they'd trout – line trout with bamboo. And they'd – that's how they made their living.

R: Was there a lot of activity on Cheniere at that time?

S: About the same. You know, different – a little bit different people because the people in Cheniere are mostly from the bayou and not – these people on Grand Isle, they weren't from Bayou Lafourche. They were from the river or other places – Myrtle Grove, and things like that. But uh, the ones in Cheniere over there – in them days, it was like two towns. They – it wasn't incorporated with Grand Isle. And the people in Grand Isle didn't get along with the people in Cheniere. Hey, very seldom they'd cross – they had a couple, two or three stores, over there across. Very seldom you see one on Grand Isle. We just didn't get along. It was fight, haha – we just didn't like them – I got a good friend of mine, and Leelee Cheramie. I remember Lily – we didn't want him to across. He could come – same age as I am. We didn't want him on this side. Ha Ha And you didn't see him very much.

R: So how would you get, prior to the bridge, how would you get from Grand – I mean uh, Cheniere to here?

S: Out there now?

R: Before the bridge, how would you get from Cheniere to here?

R: Oh, the same like you got from Bayou Rigaud to the middle of the island. Some of them had old cars, and uh, bicycles I guess.

B: But before that, what'd they do, paddle across?

S: Oh, before the bridge? Oh, that's before my time – before the bridge. I was uh, I was one year old when they opened the bridge. The Cheniere Bridge – the old bridge. I was one year old. Um, before, you

had to boat – people didn't mingle on Grand Isle much. If people cross the bridge, they were in the middle of Grand Isle.

R: So at that time, was Grand Isle still doing sugarcane?

S: Oh no. uh uh, no.

R: They were growing vegetables?

S: Well, they grew – Grand Isle grows a lot of vegetables, but before my time. I'd say in um, in the twenties. And it was big business – cucumber, watermelon, what else they grew. Cucumber and watermelon was the two top things that they grew. And uh, I remember they call this boat the Chicago. Chicago was um, a boat that navigated from Grand Isle to the French Market. And that's how the Grand Isle people would get their fruits and vegetables up to New Orleans on the Chicago. And I always thought the Chicago – haha – the Chicago was a BIG boat! You know? And one day, I saw a picture of the Chicago – oh my God. You talk about a sight. About a thirty footer, forty at the most. Ha ha. People thought – and they had another boat that used to navigate like that, but uh, I don't remember the name of it. They had two boats like that.

R: Do you remember the name Captain Sweeney?

S: Captain Sweeney? No.

R: But that's probably – at least fifty years before you, you know. He was a pretty well-known captain, but you know. He would go from Cheniere to probably, you know...

S: Never heard of him. Never heard of him.

R: Well what would you say in retrospect, looking back, what would you say are some of the most really good things about living on the island?

S: No tourists. No outsiders, no fast automobiles, gravel road, dust flying, uh, horses all over the place, cattle. I mean, it was great living. You could – we still do. We don't lock our houses. You know, we don't have no tees here. A few tees – you always got tees someplace, but we catch them. Put them in jail. We got a good police force over here. Always did have. But I mean, them days, we didn't worry about nothing. They didn't have no crime. I don't – I was – hey, I must've been thirty, forty years old before anybody got Grand Isle – a shooting or somebody killing. Never happened. It was um, you didn't have um, what they call it? Transom? People back and forth? Very few.

R: Yeah.

S: Might've had a few winos that wind up from New Orleans, wind up over here. And drunkards and things like that, but hey weren't...

R: The oil industry never impacted Grand Isle that much.

S: The oysters?

R: Oil Industry.

S: Um, no. Not really. Not really. Uh, oil industry, uh, came around in the fifties I believe. And they did their business, and Grand Isle went on, but then they took over. You know, they wanted to run Grand Isle. Then our mayor's got into it. They made the money – we got nothing. You know, they all got rich – every mayor that was in place. He comes out rich.

R: Would you say Exxon – sort of had a hand in all that?

S: Oh yeah, yes. Exxon built this place right here. They put it here. And they had that for their own people, you know. They had a lot of people on Grand Isle – outside people from Texas and all over. You know. Mostly people from Texas. And Exxon built this church here for them – that was for them. Of course, they wouldn't stop you if you wanted to participate in the church, and then they built a Methodist Baptist over there? This is Methodist - Baptist over there? And – but Exxon, when Exxon broke out and moved the houses and all that, well they were just – they wanted to rule. If you'd have let them, they'd have told you what to do. Like me – I was working through a contract for Exxon, but I had to dance their music! Oh yeah, man. They – I was looked upon – not only me. Like my friend Holbert Rigaud, we were boat welders, and uh, Robert Concienne – and uh, quite a few more, you know. Them boys – we had to dance to their music. What they said goes. If they didn't like you, they laid you off. Ain't nothing you could do about it. They were taking over, then that broke up. Um, it didn't happen. It didn't – I don't know what happened.

R: So they still seem to be kind of separate.

S: Huh?

R: They still kind of seem to be separate.

S: Oh yeah! Hey. They had their own village over there. They had – like a hundred and fifty houses. And they had all their own people over there. They had their own school bus. And the ones that wanted to go – like some of my kids went up on the bayou – on Exxon bus, but they'd foot the bill, you know what I'm saying? They'd foot the bill, and it didn't cost us nothing to uh, to send our kids to school on a bike – there was a better school in Grand Isle. Grand Isle didn't have much of a school. It was small and uh, they couldn't get teachers and all that.

R: So where would they go? Where would their kids go?

S: They would go to cutoff or Galliano, or Golden Meadow. Yeah. And the bus would pick them up in the evening – morning, and bring them back in the evening.

R: So is it safe to say that at one time, Exxon tried to kind of buy up the whole island?

S: Oh yes. I would tell it to the pope. I mean look. At one time, um, quite a few times I almost lost my job because I didn't want to be uh, ruled by Texas people. But I had to keep my mouth shut because my boss um, he was from Mississippi, and he was a mason, you know, big ring, and he pulled some, some

serious water, and you had to watch yourself if you wanted your job. And I thought – I started working in the oil field, then if I quit, when I started. I quit and I started that. But it wasn't so. Wasn't so.

R: They just tried to make you think it would be.

S: Oh yeah, they ruled you. Hey. Let me tell you. Everybody had to walk a chalk line with them over here. When they – when things broke up over here, hybrid happened, I think it was like in the eighties, when we had like a little depression like, what's happening today, and that's when Exxon pulled out – pulled their houses out, and pulled their people out. I believe that that's when they broke up the game.

R: So what did they do out there? It's mainly a storage facility, or what? It's not a refinery.

S: Yeah.

R: It is? It really it's a refinery?

S: Oh, yes sir. Yeah. Gas plant. You got the big gas plant over there. That the oil comes from offshore to the gas plant here, um, whatever they do, and uh, and look – there wasn't too many Grand Isle people that worked for Exxon. They hired their own people out of Texas and then at the end, in the last twenty, fifteen, twenty years, then they hired a few people, you know. Some of them retired. Now myself, excuse me. Myself – I was a contractor working for a contractor, and I used to make more money than Exxon – some of the Exxon employees working next to me. You know, not big bucks. We're talking about two fifty an hour, and – I'd make more – at that time, I'd make more money. And then, then Exxon finally caught up and give them more money, they said, they kept their hands, you know. But uh, then after that, after they got to make big bucks, um, we were slaves to them. They looked upon us um, you're a contractor, you. You know? That's how they looked at us.

R: I was gonna ask you that. It seems like they're representing, uh, a certain new world – and Grand Isle was sort of the old world.

S: That's it! That's the way it was.

R: They looked at Grand Isle as sort of backwards people, and that sort of thing.

S: Look. I'm not afraid to say it. If the mayors of Grand Isle - we had quite a few - would've been tough on them, we'd have a hell of a lot more than we got today. But the mayors was only to fill up the pocket. You know, they worried about Grand Isle, sure. They worried a little bit because they wanted to be reelected. But uh, no, there's no reason in the world, with the oil companies they had here – Exxon, uh, Conoco, um, whoever and little contractors – Slumber J is a big company, you know. They were here. And Brown and Root. Who's bigger than Brown and Root? They were here for, for years. Why we couldn't have a nice road or that seawall that that little piece of sand we got here with a gold railing on it from the bridge – coming this way, that's always been my dream – why we never could have that?

R: It just seems like...

S: Not brass, gold!

R: ...to build up LA-1.

S: Hey, uh, three – six miles they call it six miles of sand and sin. You might've heard the expression – six miles of sand – they used to have a sign over there. "You are now entering um, six miles of sin and sand." Or sand and sin – whatever you want – grabs you.

R: Well that brings me to a question – um, what about the clubs on the island?

S: The clubs?

R: Yeah

S: Well, like um, in the fifties, was maybe '50 to '60, the outsiders started coming in, there was always fights and uh, oh lord. Saturday night – and we didn't have much law then, you know. And it was fight out here, and uh, they had people at Tony – Tony's Rendevous – Daddy's Money right now – that's the club – that was one club that's still in the same place, and we had the casino further down, and a club, and you had Coleman's was on the beach. Didn't have no windows – it was just a hole in the wall. It was a big place, though. And um, we had two picture shows here at one time. Two movie houses.

R: Was it like a lot of seafood places – boiled seafood and that kind of deal?

S: Um, not really. Um, they never had um, big restaurants. You had uh, Big Daddy's club over there. That used to be a fellow named Dave Ficks that founded that and built that, and a few other people, and the Gulf View Hotel, which they tore up um, it tore up a few months back - Gulf View. And as far as um, good eating places, we had um, a fellow named Mack had a restaurant, where Norman Rigaud is at, Sarah's Diner. They had a little place like that but never -never no big deal.

R: Yeah. Um, at your age, with the forecast being more and more intense hurricanes, what do you feel about staying here on the island?

S: Well, I feel that I don't want to leave for the simple reason – they don't want to let you back. And I just can't see myself waiting at on the bayou over there by the, by the locks over there – that's where everybody assembles, and uh, having things to do over here, hey I'm a fellow that has a little bit of everything. I have machinery, I got horses, um, I live on two acres of land, I got a lot of trees, I got a nice home, not bragging, but uh, I work my bones.

R: So would it be fair to say that you're attached to Grand Isle?

S: Oh yeah. Yeah. But I'll tell you what – the last two storms, I've had enough of it. Oh, I'd have moved in a New York minute – but I'm too old to uproot. Where in the hell am I gonna go? I'm not fifty-two years old.

R: Yeah, it gets harder as you get older to leave here.

S: It doesn't get harder. Talk about at my age, I can't. What am I gonna do – I can't start all over again. I'm just battle it out, you know. what the hell. I'm gonna lose a tractor or tools are lost, tools are tools.

And we do the best we can with – but we stay here. Me and my son – we stay right there. I got a thirty seven year old son – he's got – he's got a harder head than I have.

R: What island are you on?

S: Me?

R: Yeah.

S: Right here.

R: Oh, right. Right here.

S: I'm on the other side of the tennis court. I own all the way to the other house over there.

R: So you come...

S: But my home is on Smith Lane. In the back here – in the corner here.

R: Oh, so you're close to Sue.

S: Yeah. I know Sue – Sue's over here. Yeah. Yep.

R: Well with the tape we have left, let me ask you this. Um, what do you think about people, like the Galliano's, moving in, and sort of taking up the gauntlet here.

S: Well, that's the best thing that ever happened; you know what I'm saying? People, people came down here and make a good living, which is a good thing, and uh, upgrade Grand Isle, you know, uh, good working people and uh, ain't nothing wrong with that. we don't have much problem with uh, most of the people over here is uh, people wants to get away from the telephone, and wants to get out here and do a little fishing, and uh, as far as me, I'm not here on Grand Isle to fish or to go swimming. Uh, I don't know why I wound up – I don't know why I wound up over here. Because my family brought me over here. But I should've been someplace else. I should've been a farmer.

R: Would it be fair to say that when you come to Grand Isle, a lot of times you come to get away from modern society?

S: That's it.

R: I feel that way.

S: I haven't crossed the bridge in two months. I need to get away, I need to – I need to go do something, go buy something, go do something. Things that I need - I neglect myself. My wife – two or three times a week, she goes to Wal-mart. She's going to Wal-mart is an outing. That's one of the greatest things on Earth here for the people of Grand Isle – we don't got one store over here, and if we don't go to Wal-mart, we can't survive buying over here. Thank God we got one, I guess. Or somebody – the good Lord would've sent us one or something.

R: There's something up the bayou somewhere.

S: Oh my God, the most inconvenient place to live in the world – Grand Isle. If you're doing something, and you need a little bolt – let's say three inches by three, and sure we don't have any – you can't find it, you know where you gotta go, huh? You can go to Fourchon, which they got a few stores over there, and since the storm has hit – a little bit worse – now they're getting back. Now you could go to Fourchon or go forty miles up to uh...

R: Larose.

S: Uh, Golden Meadow's got a True Value, or Keefe Hardware in Cutoff, or Hardy's Parts. Other than that, how many times I've left here in the middle of the day – couldn't get a flat tire fixed. Had to go – even now, if Rodney's not here in his shop, and he got a new tire machine, he don't want to work it half the time. Um, I have to load up a tractor tire. Go up the road, have it fixed.

R: Oh, well Reuben, we're gonna have to end this, but I thank you so much for spending your time.

S: Mighty fine.

R: Okay. Thank you.

S: I enjoyed talking.